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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000029

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: FORMER POLITICAL PRISONERS SEEK SUPPORT, MAY
RETURN TO POLITICAL LIFE

REF: A. 05 MINSK 661

[1](#)B. 06 MINSK 791

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d
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Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Charge met with two recently released Belarusian political prisoners who remained politically engaged despite their isolation and substandard conditions. While downplaying the significance of Belarus' upcoming local elections and opposition congress, both emphasized the need for more pressure by the international community on the Lukashenko regime. Although they seemed uncertain about their immediate plans, both alluded to resuming some form of political activism. End summary.

Background

[1](#)2. (C) This cable includes information about Charge's December 27 meeting with former opposition MP Andrey Klimov, whom a Minsk court had sentenced in June 2005 to 18 months of "khimya" (internal exile) for alleged bank fraud, and December 28 meeting with independent election monitor Timofey Dranchuk, who was sentenced in August 2006 to one year in prison for running an unregistered organization (reftels).

Prison Conditions

[1](#)3. (C) Both Dranchuk and Klimov ridiculed the authorities for portraying their "early releases" as amnesty since both had nearly completed their politically motivated sentences with pre-trial time served. However, they avoided harsh criticism of their conditions during their incarcerations. Released on December 26, Dranchuk noted that his conditions in the Minsk Number One Correction Facility were much better in terms of medical care, climate control, lighting, sanitation, and quality of food and water than those during his pre-trial detention at the filthy and overcrowded Volodarskogo and BKGB jails. Contrasting his imprisonment with Solzhenitsyn's, Dranchuk described the attitude of the general prison population as "very sympathetic" toward him and other political prisoners.

[1](#)4. (C) Released on December 22, Klimov observed that khimya resembled prison only at night when he slept in 10-person barracks with unsanitary communal bathrooms and bunk beds. (Note: Klimov had previously served four years in prison for using his construction company allegedly to defraud the Minsk

City government.) Largely unsupervised while working as a street cleaner during the day, Klimov was able to elude detention authorities to participate in the October 2005 Congress of Democratic Forces in Minsk. Throughout their post-trial incarcerations, Dranchuk and Klimov closely followed Belarus' political and economic situation through frequent correspondence with opposition activists and listening to independent radio.

Former Political Prisoners Wax Political

15. (C) Klimov avoided discussing the opposition's plans for Belarus' January 14 local elections and the coalition's possible reconfiguration and election of a single leader at the second opposition congress planned for February or March.

Instead, he tended to dwell on U.S.-Russian relations and on whom the U.S. would support as opposition leader. When Charge answered that the choice of leader was solely the decision of the opposition, Klimov argued that the U.S. has an "obligation" to take a more active role in choosing a leader since it continues to fall short in honoring its Clinton-era commitments to press the Lukashenko regime for political reform and release of political prisoners.

16. (C) While lauding past U.S. efforts to support independent election monitoring organizations, Dranchuk dismissed the importance of the 2007 local elections, calling them fait accompli. He also downplayed the opposition congress as "addressing the ambitions of a very small circle." Dranchuk maintained that the international community should strengthen its efforts to press the regime for the release of political prisoners and highlight the plight of Belarus' general prison population, the majority of whose legal cases, according to Dranchuk, had involved

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serious civil rights violations by authorities.

Plans for the Future

17. (C) Neither Dranchuk nor Klimov were firm in their future plans and both communicated their need for time away from politics. Nevertheless, Klimov did not rule out his participation in the upcoming opposition congress and possibly supporting opposition leader and former presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich. Ironically, despite his insistence that his future activism would likely be less politically focused, at meeting's end Dranchuk mentioned several recent high-level opposition contacts and presented Charge with his business card that read "Movement of Andrey Klimov."

Comment

18. (C) While Dranchuk seemed pensive and even subdued, Klimov's reputation for being charismatic and boisterously idiosyncratic held true throughout the meeting. Despite these differences in demeanor, many of their sentiments not only echoed each other but also reflected the current mood of much of the opposition writ large; that is, resignation regarding the outcome of local elections and the continuing need for strong U.S. and EU action.

Stewart